DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 048 HE 016 829

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TITLE Students' Experiences of Learning: Orientations to Learning, Perceptions of Gains, and Development as Learners.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Canada, April 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aspiration; Distance Education; Educational Benefits; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Learning Experience; *Learning Motivation; Longitudinal Studies; *Occupational Aspiration; *Student Attitudes; Student Development; *Student Motivation
IDENTIFIERS *Open University (Great Britain)

ABSTRACT

Students' orientations to learning, their perceptions of gain from their studies at Great Britain's Open University, and their development as learners were studied. Thirty students were followed from their first university course, the Social Science Foundation Course, through their two subsequent years of study, using in-depth interviews to describe their experiences. It was found that students are not merely more or less motivated to study, but are motivated to qualitatively different things. Students' orientations to learning were classified as academic, vocational, and personal, and each of the orientation categories were divided into subtypes according to whether students were primarily interested in the content of the course (intrinsic interest) or meeting degree requirements (extrinsic interest). To illustrate cases where students had more than one orientation, student comments are included. Student perceptions of five types of gains after the first year of study are considered: knowledge about new subjects, making sense of society, the growth of skepticism, a broadening and perception of change in oneself, and learning how to approach academic courses. In terms of students' development as learners, attention is briefly directed to students' growing confidence and their increasingly strategic or selective pattern of study. (SW)

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# STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING ORIENTATIONS TO LEARNING; PERCEPTIONS OF GAINS AND DEVELOPMENT AS LEARNERS

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Paper for American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, April 1983

HE016229

## STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING : ORIENTATION TO LEARNING; PERCEPTIONS OF GAINS, AND DEVELOPMENT AS LEARNERS

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe students' orientations to learning, or their overall motivation; their perceptions of gains from Open University study and how they have changed and developed as learners during their university studies.

There seems to be a trend towards qualitative methodologies for research and evaluation in eduation, so as to increase the usefulness of the findings for practising teachers. For example, Marton (1981) has introduced the label "phenomenography" to describe research from an experiential or second-order persepective. While phenomenology is basically concerned with methodology, phenomenography is substance oriented and is concerned with describing people's experience of reality. Similarly, Wilson (1977) and Filstead (1979) argue for an ethnographic or qualitative approach to research and evaluation. We shall describe a study of Open University students which is grounded in this qualitative-ethnographic research perspective.

We have followed a group of thirty students through their first university course, the Social Science Foundation Course[1], and then through their two subsequent years of study. using in-depth interviews to describe students' experiences of learning.

### Orientation to Learning

Motivation is often used to describe variations in students ability to study. However, we have found students are not merely more or less motivated to study, but are motivated to qualitatively different things. In interviews conducted before students commenced studying, we asked questions such as "How do you come to be

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1. The Open University provides degree level education for adults studying part-time at a distance. The teaching materials consist of specially prepared correspondence texts, television and radio broadcasts supported by face-to-face tuition organised at the local level. The Social Science Foundation is a "full-credit" course extending over a nine month period. Six credits are required for an Ordinary Degree. There are no formal entry qualifications for registration in the undergraduate programme.

taking this course?"; "What do you hope to gain from Open University study?" We have called this personal context for study an Orientation to Learning. We identified three distinct types of orientations amongst our sample of Open University students.

These were Academic Orientation, where the students goals were to do with the academic side of university life; Vocational Orientation, where the student's goals were to do with getting a job after university and Personal Orientation where the student's goals were to do with their personal development. Each of these types of orientation could be divided into two sub-types according to whether the student was directly interested in the content of the course or whether they were studying the course merely as a means to an end. These sub-types were labelled intrinsic and extrinsic, respectively.

(Taylor, Morgan & Gibbs, 1981)

## STUDENT'S ORIENTATIONS TO LEARNING

| ORIENTATION | INTEREST | AIM | CONCERNS |
|---|---|---|---|
| VOCATIONAL | Intrinsic | Training | Relevance of course to future career. |
| | Extrinsic | Qualification | Recognition of worth ofqualification |
| ACADEMIC | Intrinsic | Follow intellectual interest | Room to choose stimulating lectures |
| | Extrinsic | Educational advance | Grades, academic progress |
| PERSONAL | Intrinsic | Self-improvement | Challenge, interesting material. |
| | Extrinsic | Proof of capability | Passing course, feedback |

Academic Orientation - Intrinsic (Intellectual Orientation)

Students with this orientation are primarily interested in studying a particular subject 'for it's own sake'. They are intellectually interested in the subject and are interested to study at a higher level. Most students with this orientation then, had already some experience of the subject before coming to university and beause

of this tended to be 'syllabus free'. They want to follow up aspects of the subject beyond the formal curriculum. The main concern of these intellectually orientated students is to be allowed to follow their own interests.

Academic Orientation - Extrinsic (Educational Progression Orientation)

Students with academic but extrinsic orientations are primarily interested in progression through the educational system. They tended to have chosen the course because they had been successful in the subject at school, rather than study due to an intellectual interest in the subject, it was thought of as 'the next step':

> "I wanted to do something and I've done evening classes but it wasn't really enough - I don't know - I've got through that sort of stage."

> "Well basically I'm studying it because I did three 'A' levels and one of them was sociology. English doesn't seem too good really unless you want to teach and economics - well I find the maths difficult .... I suppose most of my work is for assessment. I do tend to try to work - to do my best as I can in essays because they're assessed. If you try to work hard you'll get a good mark then you haven't got much pressure when it comes to the exams."

These students are interested primarily in passing the courses and getting the degree. They tended to be competitive and to lay great stress on getting good grades. In contrast to the intrinsically interested academic students, they tended to be "syllabus bound" and in some ways be described as 'model' students, in that their essays were always in on time and they worked evenly over all the subject in the syllabus. The students with this orientation liked to have clear guidelines as to what was required for the assessments and to criticise parts of the course where there was little guidance.

Vocational Orientation - Extrinsic (Qualification Orientation)

Vocational orientation was quite prelevant in the sample of students we interviewed. Again two sub-categories appeared from studying the transcripts. For most of these students, the interest in the course was extrinsic in that qualifications were the aim rather than training.

Most of the students with vocational orientations had no particular job in mind but were hoping that in some undefined way the degree would help them to get a job sometime in the future. For one study the degree was to be a beginning:

> "I got nothing behind me, absolutely nothing. You know, no qualifications - I've only had odd jobs before and as soon as she (a young child) is old enough I'll have to get a job. Somebody said - 'The O.U. that's your best bet' - It's sort of an education basis - something behind me. ....I go for a job now I haven't got a chance - no way. And I know nothing except factory work or something - that's not what I want. I'm not that bright but I'm not thick either. So I want something so I can go and get a decent job."

For some it was to bring the prospect of a change of career:

> Well - originally the idea was to get a qualification for a career purpose you know, "cos I'm a secretary at the moment and I feel I want to study to get on - a better career in the future."

Vocational Orientation - Intrinsic (Training Orientation)

In our sample of new Social Science students only one described an intrinsic vocational orientation. In this instance O.U. study was to help him to be better at his job.

> "In my work - it appealed to me because the reaction of people is terribly important and it is not just seeing the reaction - I want to know the reason people react under various kinds of circumstances. So far, all I have is observations you know, experiences. It's important because I hope it will help me to understand people more."

Personal Orientation - Intrinsic (Broadening Orientation)

A student who is personally orientated is interested in being tested or improving as a person. The intrinsically interested student is concerned more with the broadening effect of education and is using university study as a means of changing.

This personal orientation was the most prevalent amongst our Open University students, their incentive to join the university had come often from a feeling of frustration with their life as it was.

> "I hadn't thought about that at all but I felt that I had to do something. I thought I was going round the bend being at home and I wasn't raring to go to get a job. I like looking after the house and the baby and that sort of thing, but somehow I wanted to do something else."
>
> I suppose it was waking up one morning and finding I'm 35 sort of male menopause - I can't sit around here watching T.V. for the rest of my life - let's do something."

The importance of the course to these students is to do with how it changes them as people making them more able to cope with life and making them more interesting people. They see their study as purely of personal significance:

> "It is important to me because it's the only thing that is me and that only I'm doing and that none of my family or friends are doing. It doesn't matter to anyone else results wise how you get on - and I think it is purely you doing it and you getting something out of it for yourself."

Again, the choice of course is almost irrelevant and is likely to be chosen by means of elimination rather than positive choice. These students hope that the social science course will help their understanding of everyday life. The broadening aims are summed up in their response to questions about their expectations of the course and what they expect to gain from it.

> "being at home it is easy just to go to coffee mornings and just to watch play school which are all right in themselves but it is not the end. I would hate to think of myself doing that this year, next year and the year afterwards - and also I would like to think that it might make me more interesting really — I want to feel that I've had an exiciting day and I've learnt something today or read something today and so hopefully enrich me as a person."

Personal Orientation - Extrinsic (Compensation Orientation)

Extrinsic personal orientation is where a student is doing the course to test his or her own capability. They want to find out if they are capable of a degree and if so, what the highest grade possible would be. These students will be more concerned with grades and feedback about the content of the course. It can be seen as a sort of compensation for the lack of further education in the past. Students reasons for joining the university for this orientation are to do with a feeling that they have been deprived in the past and wrongly judged by the education system. Open University study is going to prove to themselves and to other people that they are capable of higher education.

> "It's something I've always wanted to do. For personal reasons between me and my parents I didn't go to university when I should have done. I've had a hankering ever since to discover whether or not I could have done it."

> "I suppose I want to prove something to myself. The one piece I have read said it was the most difficult way anybody had yet devised to get a degree and I thought - well, if I can do it at least it will prove something to me if to nobody else, and I'd like to."

Almost as soon as they start the course it becomes important to these students to succeed in passing the course or at least in "studying the course".

## THE COMPLEXITY OF ORIENTATIONS

Although we have separated out these orientations into types and sub-types they are idealised extremes and not descriptions of the types of students in the sample. In fact, any particular student's orientation will often be a complex mix of two or more of these orientational types. For example, many Open University students could clearly be seen to be mainly personally orientated but many of these had evidence of other vocational or academic orientations. To illustrate these joint orientations and the complexity of individual students' orientations, here is an example of a student who is primarily personally orientated although there are aspects of voctional orientation:

> "Well I hope to stop myself from turning into a complete cabbage - and to widen my views on life and the problems - eventually I hope to get a degree and possibly that will help me to get a job one day which I would like to do. But I think that that is very much a secondary consideration."

This quote shows clearly the personal aims and the secondary vocational aims of this student. We can expect that both these aims will affect the student's approach to the course and a detailed description of the orientation, including the relative strength of these aims should help us to understand the particular student's approaches to studying.

Similarly, where a student shows signs of having both personal and academic orientations, both aspects of the orientations will affect the student's relationship with the course. A student who is personally orientated but also academically orientated might be interested in personal development, but more in terms of the ideas to be explored in the subject than in becoming more capable in a general way. For example:

> "I'm interested in man, in society and I realise how narrow a view I have about the way society works, about what other people feel and do and why they do these things. I got a bit from doing the A-level last year and I hope that I get an awful lot more from doing the Social Science Foundation Course this year."

In this quote one cannot distinguish clearly between the two orientations - they seem to mingle together as one orientation. However, a description of the 'ideal'

types of orientation helps to unravel a student's particular orientation and see the implications for approaches to studying.

## Students' Perceptions of Gains from Open University Study

What does it mean to look at gains from a course when we take the student's point of view? As teachers and course writers we are all too ready to stay with students' performance on assessment and understanding of the course content as a measure of success. However, from the students's viewpoint other aspects can be equally important. For example, a student whose main aim in taking an OU course is to become more confident in the general sense will be pleased to gain a course credit, but may feel that the real success was in not panicking before the examination or in a change in ability to cope with other aspects of life. Gains from higher education, besides academic ones have also been reported, for example, by Percy and Ramsden (1979) in the context of independent study; students described gains in self-confidence and increased personal awareness as important benefits from their studying.

At the end of their first year of study we asked students what they felt they had gained and learnt from the Social Science Foundation Course. Analysis of the student interviews revealed five distinct categories of students perceptions of gains; knowledge about new subjects; making sense of society; the growth of scepticism, a broadening and perception of change in oneself; and learning how to approach academic courses.

## Knowledge about New Subject Areas

One of the things one might expect students to say that they gained from a course of study is some new knowledge about the subjects covered by the course. In fact this was mentioned less frequently than other consequences of the course for example, a sense of broadening or a growth of confidence.

Only two students (out of 18[2]) mentioned specific content of the course when they spoke about what they had learnt.

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2. Drop-out during the course reduced the number of students in the end of course interviews to 18.

"I've learnt about the different disciplines and about the way the societies changed over the centuries since the industrial revolution and how this has changed everything - in the communications and Crime and things like this. You realise that things aren't always as black and white as they seem but they're very much more different. Crime, and we all commit crimes but we don't consider them as crimes so crime obviously is very dependent on who makes the rules.'

"About interpersonal communication, I didn't know what that was before, it was something new and that, the fact that that was thought significant to the way society operates was a surprise."

We are not claiming here that students had learnt little from the specific content but rather that from their point of view other outcomes might be even more important. Since it is a foundation course it is not surprising that most students reported more generally that they had learnt what social science is about. Half the students mentioned that they had learnt how to distinguish between the different disciplines.

"..well basically an insight into methods of looking at the subject. The way different disciplines will look at something, different attitudes of the sociologist and more specific examination of an individual that a psychologist would make."

"I'm more aware. it's not specialised enough in any one specific area you can't say, I've learnt a lot about politics or I've learnt a lot about sociology. On the other hand it's given me an awareness that I wouldn't otherwise have had of what those subjects are about and perhaps of what a bit more of what social sciences do. I've heard so many people say, oh yes, but sociology and social sciences are just a soft option, so many people I've heard say that and I think they're totally wrong now. I might of agreed with them once, but now I don't think it is a soft option I think it's quite hard work."

Some of the students said that they had learnt things which were going to be useful to them in making sense of things around them. They had begun to apply their knowledge to other parts of their lives.

"...I suppose I've learnt a lot in relation to my work about the psychology of work and perhaps thinking a bit deeper.... I was inclined to take a decision fairly quickly on certain things, now I do have certain experience having studied a bit of psychology and sociology and I do try and perhaps see how things are going to interrelate and affect people - spend a bit more time on it and be a bit more thoughtful than I was before."

While students said what they had learnt was of a general rather than a specific nature, these two students quoted above had gone beyond gaining an understanding of the subjects to actually applying this new knowledge of their everyday lives, for example, in relation to their work.

ii. Making sense of society

It was quite common for students to talk about how the course had affected their lives and some students referred back to the title of the course to explain what they had learnt from it. (D101 is entitled "Making Sense of Society".)

> "... The course is Making Sense of Society - to a very small degree I think I can make more sense of it now that I could before I started. Take economics - I find that I can argue and actually read things in newspapers. I can make sense of what's written not just an airy fairy phrase in the book. At a dinner party I went to a few months ago, one of the people there was an educational psychologist, one was a lecturer at London University and the other was a director of administration at Guildhall; for the first time ever I was able to keep my end up in conversation rapidly drawing on what I read in the OU. That is a terrible reason for wanting to study in the OU but I would have missed out."

For this student, there is obviously a gain in understanding the course content but also a gain in confidence in conversations and arguments.

Many students seemed to have changed their attitudes to the study of social sciences. When we interviewed students at the beginning of the course, it was clear that some of them had chosen to begin with Social Science because they felt it would be the easiest - 'a soft option' was how one student quoted earlier put it. After the course, these students felt that social science was not such a straightforward subject. They did not mean this as a criticism of the course, rather they, felt the course had shown them that the study of society was a serious and demanding task.

iii. Growth of Scepticism

Along with this acceptance of the complexity of society, students reported a development of a more critical approach to ideas.

> "You've got to question things and try and work out your ideas. I think a lot of it has shown you that there's not just one answer to different problems. I think I've learnt to look into things in greater detail than just accept them. Just really to question things more."

Almost all the students said similar kinds of things to the student quoted above and many of them also mentioned turning this new approach to good use in their everyday lives. It was not only seen as an approach to academic work but also to a study of the daily newspapers or to conversation with friends.

"I've learnt, I think this business of being sceptical is quite a big thing. In questioning things a lot more. That's probably the most valuable thing that I personally get from the course. When I read the newspaper or watch the television or something I find I'm a lot more questioning than I used to be."

The course seems to have changed students' way of approaching questions and as one student put it:

"...subject matter is almost, must be the vehicle for showing different ways of thinking and looking at the different perspectives."

iv. Broadening & Perception of Changes in Ourself

Another result of the course that many students expressed was a general growth in awareness and interest in things going on in the world. The course had deepened students' interest in the subjects they were already interested in and whetted their appetites for future study.

"...it's just broadened my interest in the subject that I thought I wanted to study, it's really brought that out, it makes me want to know more 'cos it covered, was it 5 or 6 disciplines and you can't go into a lot of depth and it just sort of whets your appetite, I wanted to read more of the recommended reading. Would have been helpful if I'd have had the time. When you look at book lists and think I'd love to read those books but I just haven't got the time, so that really got me interested now."

Four of the students reported a change in general reading habits - either a change of newspaper from the popular press to a more serious paper or else a distaste of frivolous novels in favour of more substantial material.

"... maybe I"m not so interested in trivia ... I find it very hard to describe - just a small instance, I always used to read the Daily Mail and I always used to enjoy reading the Daily Mail but now I couldn't read it to save my life, because there isn't much in it to read. When I read a newspaper now I seem to be looking at different things whereas (previously) politics, 'oh - forget that', or move straight to the women's page and read that instead.... different things interest me more and it's so nice, even to see new words that I didn't know before and I think I know something about that.... I suppose it's opened up new fields of interest really."

Leading on from the broadening aspect, students noticed changes in themselves which they attributed to the course. Firstly there were changes in their approach to life generally.

"...it's changed my life a lot you know. Whatever happens now I'm in! I don't look at the world through rose tinted glasse anymore you know. It does make you more aware of the world, whether you really understand anymore, is another matter, but you do, at least take a step back and then try and analyse the situation. It's good from that point of view."

There were also changes in abilities and skills that the course had helped students to develop.

S. "I find writing easier now than I ever did, and reading, I read with more understanding than I did.

I. What do you mean you read with more understanding?

S. Well to begin, when I began the course I had to read every paragraph about three times - I mean I haven't read anything much more than the paper and novels for years, so it took quite a while to get into the habit of trying to read and take in and understand what you were reading. So I feel that, that is useful for other things as well. It's useful for taking in new ideas in all different sorts of things. For a new job, I feel more confident to tackle something. I'd be able to understand what they want done and I'll be able to write if I have to write and things like that. If I pass, they'll be no holding me. I'll be nauseating. Somebody'll slap me down pretty quick. It's not very strong that confidence, you know, it's just there."

Some students reported a growth in understanding of the other person - an awareness that there was always another side to the coin or a reason for an action.

"I use the knowledge as regards to my work but not as a social scientist investigates things, no I don't think I'm that person, but I think I've changed a lot, I've become not tougher but softer I'm afraid. I'm always looking for reasons you know."

One of the most frequent changes mentioned by students was a growth of confidence. Students felt that through completing the course they had pushed aside a lot of their earlier doubts about their own ability.

"I think the biggest thing is the confidence - that perhaps I'm not as stupid as I thought I was, well ... I think I feel that I can do a Foundation Course anyway. What happens after that I don't know but I'd like to do these two Foundation Courses and see what happens from there. I don't have any ambitions for a degree that will be a bonus if I ever get it."

"I feel sort of different somehow I felt, I feel much more confident too and I think I'll be much happier next year I don't think I shall worry quite so much."

Many students said that summer school had been one of the best aspects of the course for increasing their confidence. It provided an opportunity to learn about how other students approached their study.

"Summer school, I found that very valuable for meeting other people and discussing, how they studied and what they did and it was quite revealing. I mean the way people studied and we compared notes, how we studied and what we left out. Up to the time that I went to summer school, I just studied everything and I discovered when I went there that some people actually left bits out which I'd never thought of doing. It never occurred to me that I could leave certain units or blocks out. Some of them had left whole blocks out and I was amazed; so I was less worried, after I came back from that and when I found out what other people did and I in fact left a block out subsequently."

v. Learning how to approach academic courses

Many of the students had difficulty understanding what university study consisted of but by the end, it was clear that the course had helped some students to develop an understanding of what was required of university study.

"I think it's given me different ideas as to how I'll approach my course next year. I will take notes which I didn't do this year. But I didn't easily know what to do or what not to do this year, I'll do quite a lot of things differently. I think I'll approach, the whole learning bit, differently, this time. And what else have I learnt? I suppose on a personal level, I've learnt to use my time effectively."

And how to approach academic subjects.

"I suppose I have perhaps developed to be methodical in approaching any given subject. I suppose I've learnt something about the different kinds of approaches."

"I suppose the actual factual knowledge is secondary really because the subject could have been different, but the insight into methods would be the same. I suppose the knowledge itself is not so important."

Orientation to Learning and Gains from Studying

One would expect there to be a logical link between students' orientations to learning i.e. their aim attitudes and expectation in relation to a particular course and their perceptions of gains. When we examined students' orientation at the start of the course and what they said about their gains from study, we found some evidence of an empirical link between what students said in the two interviews. Where students had expressed an interest in personal development at the start of the course, there was a corresponding emphasis on personal gains in our interviews at the end of the course.

The links between the personal, academic and vocational orientations and gains were visible where the orientations were intrinsic. However, it was more difficult to identify links between the extrinsic orientations and the gains students expressed.

There might be a reason for this. In the case of extrinsic orientations, for example, getting a qualification, (vocational extrinsic orientation) students are concerned with the longer term result of a degree rather than with one particular course within that degree. So, when asked about gains from a course, it is not surprising that students did not answer in terms of having gained a qualification because the course is merely a component of that aim - a means to an end.

Nevertheless, it is clear from a comparison of the two sets of comments, there is a relationship between orientation and gains as described by the students. The following sets of quotes illustrate the type of relationships that we found. The first quote in each pair is from the first interview (before the course started) and the second is from the interview at the end of the course. The first set of quotations is from student who has a Compensation type of orientation. The course seems to have served the function of helping this student to prove something to herself in that she is capable of university level study at least at foundation level.

| | |
|---|---|
| Joan<br><br>Orientation | "I've got a neighbour who is doing the OU and I suppose in all honesty I felt if he can do it I don't see why I can't.... I didn't do much at school -I got to my mid twenties and I started to think - 'perhaps you're not as stupid as you thought'. I have to prove to myself that I can stick to it and do it." |
| Joan<br><br>Gains | "I think the biggest thing is the confidence and perhaps I"m not as stupid as I thought I was, well perhaps I didn't think I was stupid anyway. But I can do a foundation course so we'll see what happends from there." |

The next set of quotes shows a student with the other type of personal orientation which we call Broadening, where the aim is for self development. Here again this aim seems to have been fulfilled by the course.

Sandra — Orientation

"I don't know - being at home it is easy just go to the coffee mornings and just to watch Play School which are all night in themselves, but I would hate to think of myself doing that this year, next year and the year afterwards. And also I would like to think that it might make me more interesting. I want to feel that I've had an exciting day that I've learnt something today or read something today and so hopefully enrich me as a person."

Sandra — Gains

"I think it's given me a new awareness. I listen more now to what is being said - I can see the other side of the coin a bit more and stop and think. It's made me feel different somehow, maybe just doing something, applying yourself to something. And I'm not so interested in trivia - hard to describe, but I always used to read the 'Daily Mail' but now I couldn't because I, there's not much in it. Just reading a different newspaper I seem to be looking at different things. Just opened new fields of interest really.

The fourth student has a vocational intrinsic (training) orientation and his gains were to do with a growth of awareness at work. This student seems to have changed his work practice in line with learning from the course which fits well with his reason for choosing the course in the beginning.

Derek — Orientation

"I think I chose the social science one possibly because the sociology ones are more related to day to day environment things that I do. I cover Personnel at work so it seemed to be a useful vehicle to start with. I suppose I want a broader knowledge of the basic things I'm doing on a daily basis."

Derek — Gains

"If I hadn't done the course I would have missed a lot of what I've learnt in relation to my job in dealing with people, the psychology of work and that kind of thing and perhaps thinking a bit deeper. I was inclined to take a decision quickly on certain things and now I do have certain experience having studied a bit of psychology and sociology, in certain cases I do try and perhaps work out how things are going to interrelate to people - perhaps more thoughtful than I was before."

The final example below shows a student with an aim to improve ability to study and very similar types of gains again showing an emphasis on self-development but here towards academic concerns rather than life in general.

| | |
|---|---|
| Liz<br><br>Orientation | "I hope it will broaden my mind. I'd have this ability to express myself without it all going out of my head. I'd learn to write more easily. I haven't really done much since school days so I think it will give me more confidence." |
| Liz<br><br>Gains | "....it's given me confidence to study and it's taught me about the methods of study which is half of what I was looking for anyway, other than the content of the course itself." |

These four examples show the nature of the relationship between students' orientation to learning and their perceptions of what they gained from the Social Science Foundation course. For some students, success in terms of the formal assessment may not in their terms be the only success. With adult students studying part-time, at a distance, we need to look at gains from studying or what constitutes learning in a broader way so as to include the affective and personal dimension of learning.

## Students' Development as Learners

How do students change and develop as a result of their experiences of university? As teachers we are aware that change does occur - so what is the nature of this change? Perry (1970) in "Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development" has described how students in a liberal arts college in the U.S.A. developed their epistemological framework. From initially holding an absolutist conception of knowledge, where the teacher was perceived as the authority figure "knowing the answers", Perry described how students gradually moved towards a more realistic conception of knowledge and finally how some students developed a personal commitment to a particular relativistic position.

Saljo (1979 a & b) in Sweden studied peoples conceptions of learning by asking them "What do you actually mean by learning?" He identified five distinct conceptions. Conceptions 1, 2 and 3 are concerned with learning as an accumulation of information, the memorization of facts and the learning of set procedures to be used in practice, whereas conceptions 4 and 5 describe learning as the "abstraction of meaning" and as an "interpretive process aimed at understanding some aspects of reality". In the case of Conceptions 1, 2 and 3, learning is seen as a passive activity with the emphasis on reproducing knowledge whereas for conceptions 4 and 5 knowledge is actively constructed by the learner. Although Perry and Saljo were concerned with conventional university students we can see many parallels in our

transcripts from interviews we carried out with the Open University student during their second and third years of study[3]. For example one student described study in their first year as follows:

> "I just think that I harped back to school days too much and I am surprised there aren't the facts there presented for me and - I don't know - I do find some of the course text - I read it through and I think, oh I don't know what on earth I have read there, I read it through page after page."

In their second year learning was described very differently:

> "Obviously, there is an amount of learning facts and figures but basically I think of it more as understanding the different issues that are brought up in either social science or technology. Because there aren't always hard facts to learn, there are always so many different sides. So it isn't so much learning, as understanding the problems and the factors that affect the final decision, because there isn't really a "right" and a "wrong", it depends who you are..... Learning, as we are being taught now is meant as understanding, rather than learning facts by memory."

This student has moved to a more sophisticated conception of learning in Saljo terms and also developed in the way similar to Perry's scheme.

From students' first year of study gains in confidence in general about the O.U. system were often important. For adult students studying part-time at a distance, this can be an important step, as "sussing-out" what is required of them is probably a slower and more difficult process than in a conventional on-campus university.

Closely linked to this general confidence was an increasingly strategic or selective pattern study. No longer was all the course material, particularly the specially prepared correspondence text seen as "essential reading" which had to be covered.

> "I'm more selective - I look at a unit and if I know that they are not going to be interesting I don't waste a lot of time trying to do it ..... it's the type of course that you can leave out bits - you can apply theory to any culture - as long as you have done the theory you can apply it."

Students were developing the confidence to miss out parts, to be more selective and focus their study around the required assignments. This is not to say that their study became merely an "assessment-driven" ritual - rather studying was becoming more focussed and the aim and purpose in working through the correspondence text was clearer. This is a marked contrast to how some starting students who saw all

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3. Further drop-out reduced the sample to 12

the text as at the same level and described their study as just "reading from cover to cover".

Many students, were taking a second foundation course (the university regulations require students to take two foundation courses) and the lack of familiarity with a different subject area influenced how they went about studying. This was particularly clear with students taking the Science Foundation Course after the Socail Science Foundation.

> "I approach it the same way as I did the other course - obviously the content is different - I'm never quite sure when I've finished - I feel that I don't really know it.... I feel I am not retaining all that much information. With social science, if I was given a question I had a good idea how to answer it - whereas with this you have got to know the particular formula on the particular way of doing it and sometimes I don't feel that I remember that - in fact I know I don't remember it - it doesn't all hang together whereas social science seemed to hang together more."

It seems that the demands of the subject material are having the overriding influence on this student's habits - the need to be able to reproduce certain information or know the "scientific language" before any other learning activity can take place.

For another student the title and nature of their second year course, still a foundation course seemed to influence her self-perception as a student and her holding an absolutist conception knolwedge.

> "look, I'm a foundation student I don't pull this unit to pieces, I accept what they have told me - I must accept what they are saying because I assume that they know what they are talking about and they are putting it that way probably to spoon-feed me as I'm unlikely to understand, it any other way."

Even though this student had succeeded in her first foundation course, she had still not developed much confidence in her abilities.

> "I mean sometimes you get moments of panic when you think my brain is only capable of developing so far and it seems to have reached its full extension at this particular moment - obviously I'm thick."

The influence of course choice was particularly imporant for some students - where a course turns out somewhat different from expected this can totally change

how a student tackles studying. Their orientation to learning becomes very clearly extrinsic in that they are merely doing the minimum to pass the assessment.

> "it wasn't like I expected - if I had known it was like this I wouldn't have done it - this business about language and structure it's all very complicated I find it difficult to grasp - in doing the essay, I just picked out what I thought relevant and I got an A..... the differences between structuralism and functionalism for analysing popular culture - I don't really understand what structuralism means, but I just picked bits out of the units."

Descriptions of how students develop as learners can give insights into how to facilitate this development and to provide an understanding of learning from students' perspectives.

## A Conceptual Framework for Understanding How Students Learn

Students orientations to learning, their perceptions of gains and their development as learners can be linked to the concepts of their approach to study and the outcomes of learning.

Marton and Saljo (1976) identified how students approach learning tasks and how approach is related to learning outcomes. In one study, students were asked to study an article about educational reform in Sweden. They were then asked in individual interviews to summarize the article in a few sentences and then to reflect on how they had gone about reading the article. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed two very different approaches to study. One group of students described their approach in the following ways:

> "Well I just concentrated on trying to remember as much as possible" and "I sort of tried to memorize everything I've read - not everything, but more or less."

In contast, another group of students described their approach as follows:

> "I tried to look for the principal ideas", "What was the point of the article?" and "I thought about how the author built up the whole thing."

These qualitatively different approahces to studying were termed 'surface-level' and 'deep'level', respectively. They were directly related to what students had understood from the article. None of the students who described their approach in terms categorized as a surface-level approach completely understood the author's argument. In contrast, all of the students who took a deep-level approach gained

a good understanding of the article. We have also identified these different approached to study with O.U. students. (Morgan, Taylor & Gibbs, 1982).

The distinctions of deep and surface approaches to study seem to have very close parallels to Saljo's conceptions of learning. Conceptions 1, 2, 3 relate to surface approahces whereas conceptions 4 and 5 relate to deep approaches.

We can see students orientation to learning, their conception of learning and their approach to study as interrelated concepts which will influence the outcomes of learning. Also the nature and demands of the learning tasks and the assessment will influence what students learn. For example, Becker, Geer & Hughes (1968) highlighted how the unintended side effects of the assessment system distorted and trivialised what students learnt.

This conceptual framework developed from student's experiences of learning suggests that the most important aspects of improving student learning are developing students awareness of how they study or changing their conception of learning and the nature of the learning tasks, course design and especially the assessment system. Study skill "courses" should focus on helping students to become more aware of their study habit patterns (Gibbs, 1981), rather than attempts to teach set techniques such as note-taking or speed reading.

Phenomenological approaches to research in student learning can provide new insights into learning which are unlikely to be uncovered by traditional approahces to research and evaluation. By developing a conceptual framework for understanding how students learn which is based in student's realities of learning our efforts to improve learning are more likely to be focussed on the crucial dimensions of study as students expeience it.

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